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ELEMENTS OF HUMOR IN THE SATIRE OF ARISTOPHANES

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For the display of wit, satire is a tempting field. It is immeasurably easier to be merry at one's expense than in his praise. Conversely, satire, to be worthy the name and rise above mere diatribe, must be dashed with wit. It is the sugar coat that obscures whatever of spite or peevishness the satire may contain and helps us swallow the otherwise unsavory dose.

But, for its full effectiveness, satire should be seasoned with humor too. When humor is absent we get an unpleasantly acrid flavor that the wit does not avail to conceal. It is partly for this reason that on most of us Pope's famous lines on Addison have a distinctly unpleasant effect. They have no humor. They are, as it were, hissed through the teeth and scarcely arouse the impulse to smile.

If a satirist has a moral aim and desires to exercise a beneficial effect upon the object of his satire, he must be something more than a wit. If his satire has no humor it will be ineffective, for it will stimulate pique rather than introspection or self-examination. A Juvenal, witty enough, but perhaps the least humorous of men, delivers his attack on the vices of his time in a severe and defiant spirit that breathes, not sympathy, but scorn. And without sympathy there can be no humor. Happy he who can at once lash the vices and foibles of a society or an individual and soothe the sting of the blows by the play of a genial humor.

On occasion Aristophanes is pre-eminently the poet of slashing satire. Some of his attacks, particularly that on Cleon, whether they sparkle with wit, or, as is not infrequently the case, descend to the sheerest billingsgate, are lacking in genuine humor. The effect is often the opposite of what the poet intended. We feel impelled to make excuses for the victim or even to attempt formal rehabilitation.

But far more often the poet exhibits a vein of true humor in the passages in which he scores the society or individuals of the stirring period in which his activity fell. He holds them up to ridicule, not to scorn. To be sure, he is much in earnest; he is not fighting as one that beateth the air; but his pen has not been dipped in gall; a genuine humor flashes amid his thunders, and we can conceive that Socrates and he might remain on fairly good terms after the performance of the *Clouds*, in which the poet had so mercilessly caricatured the philosopher.

Certain moderns have had the temerity to declare that the ancients had no humor, indeed, could have none, because their world was so bounded as to afford no scope for the contrasts and incongruities which constitute the essence of humor. Such language will convince no one who has studied the ancient world with any sympathy or insight, for he will know that contrasts were as intense and proportionately as abundant in Corinth as in Paris, in Athens as in Boston. Probably the humor of the South is less pronounced than that of the North. The North loves the grotesque; the passion of the South has ever been for beauty. *Bellezza* may be right in assigning to the Gothic peoples the primacy in humor. But the South has a humor of its own. It lacks the broad strokes in which Dickens reveled, but it has a fineness of point and a subtlety of approach that are often as effective as the stronger contrasts. He who finds it hard to appreciate the humor of the ancient Greeks must recollect that they were of the South and averse to the highly seasoned product which his own palate has learned to demand.

Another important point of contrast between ancient and modern humor lies in the prevailingly objective character of the ancient type. Man has reached a comparatively advanced stage of humor when he begins to make fun of himself. The subjective or introspective type, it has been said, is never found, at least as a native growth, among the ancient Romans, who took themselves and their institutions very seriously indeed. The generalization is doubtless too broad, but it is beyond dispute that the Athenian of the Periclean period was already far on the road to a more modern kind of humor. He could so detach himself from the society of

which he was a member as keenly to enjoy a satire on its foibles. He could relish even a burlesque on his own mythology. For his time, his development in this direction was unique. No other people of antiquity attained in anything like the same measure the capacity for introspective humor. No other ancient humor came so near deserving the words which have been used to characterize the American type—"a pure comical intention, which will stop at nothing for its joke, and will some day make fun of all the world, not forgetting itself."

Modern as these Greeks were in their humor, the most modern among them was the bald-pated comedian of Cydathene. It is going too far, I think, to call him, as some have called him, the greatest humorist the world has ever seen, but it is fairly beyond dispute that he is the most modern of any humorist on his side of the Middle Ages. Traill has pointed out that from him we have the clearest, if not the earliest, utterance of that human irony which has since spread worldwide—the irony which contrasts men and beasts, only to find man the lower animal—the irony that breathes through Gulliver's voyage to the country of the Houyhnhnms and Tolstoy's *Story of a Horse*. It is found in the passage where the birds, about to found a metropolis of their own, plume themselves on their superiority to man (*Aves* 685-90).

Come, sons of men, dim-lived, like falling leaves,
Creatures of little might, all formed of clay.
Shadowlike, strengthless, wingless, how man grieves
That swift and dreamlike speeds his life away!
To us attend, to us, who live for aye,
Dwellers in ether, ageless, us whose thought
Is ever changeless, that from us ye may
Learn rightly how the frame of things was wrought.

"When man smiled at his own insignificance," says Traill, "cosmic humor was born."

The heat of satire directed against the human race is so diffused that no one is seriously scorched thereby. But would the Athenians endure to hear themselves satirized as a people? Would they stand ridicule directed against the unique democratic and semi-socialistic institutions of which they were so proud? The poet must be careful, as he discovered very early in his career when he

was (probably unsuccessfully) prosecuted by Cleon for satirizing the Athenian magistracies in his *Babylonians*. In his next play he took occasion to defend himself through the mouth of the chorus (*Acharnians* 630-33):

His enemies have slandered him to Athens, quick to make its plan,
Of "ridiculing this our state and people, the insulting man!"
And so he needs must make reply to Athens, apt to change its plan:
Full many of your late reforms the poet claims that he began.

In still another way he hedged himself against possible ill consequences from satirizing the Athenian people. "Men laugh," says Hobbes, in a famous and oft-quoted passage, "at the follies of themselves *past*, when they come suddenly to remembrance." A man can more safely satirize what we have been than what we are. But if he can make us think that we only have been that which we really have not ceased to be, he can direct his shafts against our present practices and yet stir us to laughter. This device Aristophanes employs with great skill in the *Knights*. He represents Demus, the personified State, the Uncle Sam of Athens, as a testy, selfish, suspicious old dotard, a very tyrant to his household, but, in his turn, absolutely under the thumb of a recently purchased slave, obviously Cleon, who alternately cajoles and domineers over him. This Demus is scathingly satirized, but usually with qualifications. In politics he does act like a fool, but in private life he's a very sensible chap (*Equites* 752-55):

At home the fellow's clever as can be
But when he sits him down upon that Pnyx
He gapes just like a child at bob-fig play.

Perhaps, after all, he isn't quite such a fool as he looks and acts. To the reproaches of the chorus he makes spirited reply (*Equites* 1121-30):

No brains are within your skull,
You think me to be so dull.
On purpose I seem so full
Of senselessness utter.
I tell you I like to play
An infantile part each day;
I *want* to support a thief—
A minister one and chief,
Till from a rich man in brief
He sinks to the gutter.

But at the close of the play Demus abandons this line of defense, and freely admits to the sausage-seller that he has been a drivelling dotard (*Equites* 1335-49; 1354-57):

- Demus:* My dearest Agoracritus, come here.
What a good turn you've done, refining me!
- Agoracritus:* What I? You don't know what you were before,
Nor what you did, or sure you'd call me God.
- Demus:* How did I act before? Don't hide the facts.
Tell me what sort of chap I used to be.
- Agoracritus:* Well, first, if someone in the assembly said,
"O Demus, I'm your lover; you're my love.
For all your interests I alone provide,"
My! how you'd flap your wings and toss your horns!
- Demus:* What I?
- Agoracritus:* And by such words he buncoed you.
- Demus:* Well, well! How did I get myself so fooled?
- Agoracritus:* By Zeus, those ears of yours would open wide
And shut again, like any parasol.
- Demus:* Oh, what a fool and dotard I have been!
.
- Agoracritus:* Why hang your head there? Why can't you stand still?
- Demus:* I'm so ashamed of all my past misdeeds.
- Agoracritus:* Why, you were not to blame, don't worry so.
Your counselors deceived you.

The satire is keen, but it is directed against Demus, not as he is, but as he was and is no longer.

But such circumspection and such qualifications characterize only the early career of Aristophanes. With the growth of his fame and popularity he launched forth more freely into satire on his audience. The bulk of the *Frogs*, produced twenty years after the *Knights*, is a satire on their literary judgment. Dionysus, the Hammerstein of Athens, finds himself condemned by the dearth of dramatic talent in town to take a flying trip to Hades, in the hope of bringing back to earth one of the great playwrights. But Dionysus is more than an *impresario*; he represents the popular judgment on literary matters, and is portrayed as a perfect idiot in this field. Arrived at his destination and finding the ghosts of the dead poets disputing for the tragic throne, he is chosen to arbitrate the matter, and our comedian's estimate of his critical acumen is shown by the utterly trifling character of most of the points urged on either side and by the shallowness of the comments

that Dionysus makes on such evidence as is presented. This is of a piece with the parabasis of the second edition of the *Clouds*, in which Aristophanes roundly scolds his audience for not awarding him the prize at the first presentation of the play.

He is sometimes even more satiric than this. He tells his audience that honest men are mighty scarce in Hades—as they are in Athens. In the *Clouds* (1098 f.) one character asks another what he thinks of the spectators, and receives the reply that by far the major part seem to be victims of evil courses. There is a neat skit at their expense in the *Frogs*, if the stage business has been rightly guessed. When Dionysus, accompanied by his slave Xanthias, starts on his perilous journey, he makes a call on Heracles, who had previously made the trip in connection with what Conan Doyle might call “The Adventure of the Polycephalous Hound.” From him he seeks information about the roads, the restaurants, the resorts of good fame—and otherwise, and the inns where there were the fewest bedbugs. Heracles describes to him, among other things, a sort of Dantesque abyss of mire and filth in which he will see immersed the incestuous, parricides, robbers, perjurers, assassins, and such gentry. When they reach the locality, the god asks his slave if he sees the parricides and perjurers of which Heracles had told them. “Yes,” says Xanthias, turning his master around and pointing full at the audience, “are you blind?” “Ah,” says the god, “I see them now, they’re in the pit, by Jove!” (*Ranae* 274 ff., Huntingford’s translation). And this when the poet’s success depended on the approval of the audience he was so viciously scoring!

The satire of Aristophanes is strongly instinct with the humor of optimism. He always hopes for better things. He has none of the despairing cynicism with which so many of our contemporaries refer to the title mart, the Reno colony, the summer girl and her fragile engagement, the grafter, the receiver of bribes. The modern acquiesces, reluctantly no doubt, but he does acquiesce, and, by touching upon the humorous aspects of the situation, tries to make the best of a bad job. The result is a bleak mixture of optimism and pessimism, to which one might well prefer the jeremiad of a Persius.

Leaving out of account the more strictly verbal elements of the humor of Aristophanes, the puns, the jokes by surprise, which often are rather wit than humor, we observe that in the field of burlesque Aristophanes is brilliant and daring. Nothing is too sacred for him to make ridiculous in this way. Perhaps his very finest are his burlesques of the gods, as that in the *Birds*. It is a curious fact, for which I have at hand no explanation that seems to me adequate, that Aristophanes, who so unmercifully scored Socrates for his minor heterodoxies, should himself bring the gods of the state before his audience in such humiliating and often disgusting situations. True it is that in the pantheon of a polytheistic religion, as in the ethereal firmament, one star differeth from another star in glory. Some deities were held in far greater honor at Athens than were others. It was not so bad to burlesque Prometheus or Heracles, for they were scarcely above the rank of heroes, though the latter, at least, had his yearly festival at Athens. We have heard of the mother who objected to her son's ejaculation, "The devil!" on the ground that, though it was not exactly swearing, it seemed like making light of sacred things. But in the figure of his Satanic majesty the Catholicism of the Middle Ages found choice material for humor, nor was he the only "Bible character" to be caricatured in the mystery plays; but it was only very incidentally, so far as I am aware, that the persons of the Trinity were burlesqued by the monks. Aristophanes, however, builds his whole satire on the literary taste of Athens around a caricature of Dionysus, at that time one of the foremost gods of the state and the deity in whose honor the play that caricatured him was being presented. He is made to exhibit cowardice, lust, stupidity, he is soundly spanked by a warden of Hades, he is reduced to the most disgusting physical consequences of utter terror, and he flees for sanctuary to the knees of his own priest in the front row of the auditorium. The poet must have felt with the author of the popular "Stein Song" that—

The Lord wont be censorious
If his children have their fling.

Diogenes is said to have complained that the Athenians liked to have the things they should have held most dear pelted with dangerous banter. Like other Ionians, and in sharp contrast with

less mercurial branches of the Greek stock, they lived on the best of terms with their gods. In the carnival license of the feast of the wine-god, the poet perhaps saw no reason why the gods should be exempt from a humorous and good-natured form of that satire, to which, at that season, it was his privilege to subject his fellow-townsmen.